

Gillette News Record

Collins heads into next half-century looking forward

Looking at Collins Communications today, it can be hard to see a company that began as a radio repair shop in Gillette's oil-booming heyday in the 1960s.

"It wasn't a communications company at all," Collins co-owner Rick Murray said.

Ed Collins the pilot (not the former Gillette mayor) couldn't find anyone to repair his radios, so he decided to fix his own.

"So they started a communications company, to get his own stuff fixed," Murray said.

Fifty years and a couple changes of hands later, Collins Communications is thriving, and Murray chalks it up to one thing: Diversity.

"Without diversity, companies in Wyoming and in Gillette have suffered and vanished," he said. "We honestly believe that the longevity comes from diversity. So that's one of the things that we've maintained, we always pay attention to what's happening to Gillette and the needs of Gillette and we try to fit it in our cloud."

That has grown over the years from a mere radio repair shop in 1964 to an enterprise serving northeast Wyoming and portions of Montana and South Dakota with phone service, security systems, life safety systems and more.

"They were actually just a radio shop, and then they took on telecommunications, telephone systems," Murray said.

During the oil boom, when housing was being thrown up as fast as people could move in, phone companies only installed to the property line.

"Companies like ours take it all the way through the inside of the home or the business," Murray said. "So they just basically provide the service to the door and we take it to the next level."

After that came radio patching services — the Radio Common Carrier system, essentially Campbell County's first cellular network.

"During the first boom, the oil patch, to get hold of their family, they didn't have cellphones back then, so Collins did a phone patch," Murray said. "Through a radio, they were actually able to call home and check in and talk to the family. ... We had that deployed here at all of our tower sites. If you took all of our towers, you had a pretty good coverage map of Wyoming."

Next came security systems, and the company has continued to expand to anticipate and fit the community's needs.

Murray said that expansion and diversification has led other companies to mock Collins over the years, but he said their derision doesn't matter.

"'Collins, they do everything.' And then they made that to be a bad thing," he said. "I used to just laugh, because that diversity is what keeps us going. No matter what, when the boom is not happening, and this particular department is slow, these other departments were able to maintain people."

The business changed hands in the '70s, and then in the 21st century Murray bought the company along with Cheryl Dittus and Shane Miller. Earlier this year, Miller sold his share to Dittus and Murray.

The owners, like the company, started in seemingly small positions, learning their way around and figuring out how to reach their goals.

"I started out as a receptionist, and I just worked my way up through the company, and here I am today," Dittus said.

She's been with the company 23 years.

"I'm always doing something different every day, and I'm a person that likes to stay busy," she said. "In this company, you're always learning new things."

Administrative assistant and marketing coordinator Carrie Morris also started as a receptionist, around 10 years ago.

"I grew up in a family where it was always technology, new cameras or different computers," she said. "It's fun to always get to learn something new. It's the exciting part. 'OK, what solves problems now? What's going on? What's the new solution?'"

Murray — fresh out of high school, longing to be an architect but lacking job prospects and college money 22 years ago — hired on as a radio installer.

"The lowest position the company had at that time," Murray said. "Collins offered me the first thing that looked like a career if I made it such."

During an interview with one of the previous owners, he was asked what job he would like.

"I asked him: 'Well, what's your job?' And he says, 'Well I own the company.' And I said, 'Well that's unrealistic,'" Murray said.

The general manager chimed in with his job title.

"I said, 'That'll be my goal,'" Murray said. "If you know me, that's the way I am."

He and Dittus credit Collins and the owners after him for maintaining flexibility and an open mind.

"I'll tell you this: We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for those old owners," Murray said, Dittus nodding her head in agreement.

"They provided opportunities," Murray said.

"The opportunity to buy this business," Dittus said.

"And the opportunity to change it," Murray said. "When I worked here, when I took over my first division, they gave me permission to do it my way, and they just supported (me), and I did it my way."

That flexibility has led to the multifaceted company that provides schools, businesses and more in Campbell County with Internet, security and surveillance, fire and access control, voice and data services, a land-mobile radio department and more than 20 tower sites with rentable antenna space.

Collins and its employees celebrated the company's 50th anniversary Sept. 20 with an open house.

The employees and their families were easy to spot, wearing orange T-shirts. Murray said that was to make them easy to recognize and thank.

"Really, for us, it's more of a social environment for us to connect to our customers," he said. "It's very important for us that we recognize the families, because this summer, we worked a lot of extra hours and families went without their loved ones during that time, because there was so much work to be done."

That work included several projects for the Campbell County School District.

"They needed a lot of improvements for communications and then some safety," Murray said.

He said the greatest battle the company faces these days is a pervasive misconception about what they do — and don't do.

"I don't think people realize the diversity that lives here. They're often amazed, but it's changed," he said.

"Getting over the hurdle of just being a two-way radio shop" has taken time, Dittus said.

"Or cellphone — we were cellphone for a while, and a lot of people still think of Collins as a cellphone company," Dittus said. "That's not us anymore."